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THE FAIR MAID OF ASTOLAT. LITERATURE CURRICULUM III.

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A STUDENT GUIDE FOR THE STUDY OF "THE FAIR MAID OF ASTOLAT" WAS PREPARED FOR USE IN NINTH-GRADE ENGLISH CLASSES. THIS MYTH FROM THE STORIES OF KING ARTHUR AND HIS KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE RECOUNTS THE TALE OF THE INCOGNITO SIR LAUNCELOT AND HIS PART IN A TOURNAMENT AND HIS MEETING WITH THE FAIR MAID, ELAINE. RELATED REPORTS ARE ED 010 129 THROUGH ED 010 160 AND ED 010 803 THROUGH ED 010 832. (AL)

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THE FAIR MAID OF ASTOLAT

Literature Curriculum III

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THE FAIR MAID OF ASTOLAT

It happened, on a time, near the Feast of Assumption Day, that King Arthur proclaimed a great joust and tournament that should be on that day at Camelot, otherwise called Winchester. And the king proclaimed that he and the King of Scots would joust against all that would come against them.

And when this proclamation was made, thither came the King of North Wales, and the King with the Hundred Knights, and the King of Northumberland, and many other noble dukes and earls of other diverse countries.

So King Arthur made him ready to depart to his joust, and would have had the queen accompany him; but at that time she would not go, she said, for she was sick and might not ride. But many thought the queen would not go because of Sir Launcelot, for he would not ride with the king; for he said he was not yet healed of a wound that he had. Wherefore the king was sad and passing wroth, and so he departed toward Winchester with his fellowship, and lodged by the way at a town called Astolat. So when the king was departed, the queen called Sir Launcelot unto her and said thus:

"Sir, ye are greatly to blame thus to remain behind. What will your enemies and mine say and think?"

"Have ye no fear, madam," said Sir Launcelot. "Tomorrow I will take my way toward Winchester. But know that at the joust I will be against the king and against all his fellowship."

And so upon the morn, early, he heard mass and dined, and so he took his leave of the queen and departed. And in the evening he came to Astolat, to the castle of an old baron called Sir Barnard of Astolat. And as Sir Launcelot entered into his lodging, King Arthur espied him, as he did walk in a garden beside the castle, and knew him well.

"Well, sirs," said King Arthur unto his knights that were with him beside the castle, "I have now espied one knight that will do passing well at the joust, I dare say."

"Who is that?" said the knights.

"At this time ye shall not learn from me!" said the king, and smiled, and went to his lodging.

So when Sir Launcelot was unarmed in his chamber, the old baron, Sir Barnard, came to him and welcomed him in the best manner. But he knew not Sir Launcelot.

"Fair sir," said Sir Launcelot to his host, "I would pray you to lend me a shield that were not openly known, for mine is well known."

"Sir," said his host, "ye shall have your desire. I have two sons that were but lately made knights. And the eldest is called Sir Tirry, and he was hurt the same day he was made knight, and he may not ride; and his shield ye shall have, for it is not known. And if it please you, my younger son,

Sir Lavayne, shall ride with you unto that joust, for he is, for his age, strong and stalwart. And now I pray you to tell me your name."

"As for that," said Sir Launcelot, "ye must excuse me at this time. If God give me grace to speed well at the joust, I shall come again and tell you my name. But I pray you let me have your son Sir Lavayne with me, and that I may have his brother's shield."

"Sir, all this shall be done," said Sir Barnard.

And this old baron had a daughter that was called at that time the Fair Maid of Astolat, and ever she beheld Sir Launcelot and felt great love for him. And her name was Elaine. And because of her love for him, she besought Sir Launcelot to wear upon him at the joust a token of hers.

"Damsel," said Sir Launcelot, "if I grant you that, ye may say I do more for you than ever I did for any lady."

But then he remembered that he would go to the joust disguised, and because he had never before worn a token of any damsel, he thought he would wear a token of hers, that thus no one might know him. And he said,

"Fair maiden, I will wear a token of yours upon my helmet. And therefore what is it? Show it to me."

"Sir," she said, "it is a red sleeve of mine, well embroidered with great pearls."

And so she brought it to him, and Sir Launcelot received it and said,

"Never before did I do so much for any damsel."

Then Sir Launcelot gave the Fair Maid his own shield and prayed her to keep it until he should come again.

Then upon a morning King Arthur and all his knights departed. And then Sir Launcelot and Sir Lavayne made them ready, and each of them had a white shield, and Sir Launcelot carried with him the red sleeve.

And so they took their leave of Sir Barnard, the old baron, and of his daughter, the Fair Maid, and then they rode till they came to Camelot, also called Winchester. And there was a great throng of kings, dukes, earls, and barons, and many noble knights. But Sir Launcelot and Sir Lavayne were lodged privately, that no man in that town was aware who they were. And so they waited there till Assumption Day, when the great joust should be.

So on that day the trumpets blew and King Arthur was set upon a platform to behold who did best. (But the king would not let Sir Gawaine go from him, for never did Sir Gawaine have the better when Sir Launcelot was in the field.) And upon the side of King Arthur was the King of Scots. And the other party was the King of North Wales and the King with the Hundred Knights and the King of Northumberland. Then either party drew apart from the other and every man made him ready in his best manner to do what he might. And

Sir Launcelot made him ready and put the red sleeve upon his helmet and fastened it fast. And so Sir Launcelot and Sir Lavayne departed out of Winchester privately and rode into a little wood behind the party that was against King Arthur's party. And there they held them still till the parties smote together. And there began a strong assault on both parties. And the knights of the Round Table, along with others, came in together and beat back the King of Northumberland and the King of North Wales.

When Sir Launcelot saw this, as he waited in the little wood, then he said unto Sir Lavayne,

"Now, if ye will help a little, ye shall see yonder fellowship that chaseth these men on our side go as fast backward as they went forward."

Then Sir Launcelot and Sir Lavayne came in at the thickest of the press, and there Sir Launcelot smote down five knights with one spear. And Sir Lavayne smote down two more. And then Sir Launcelot got another great spear, and he smote down four knights; and Sir Lavayne smote down another. And then Sir Launcelot drew his sword, and he smote on the right hand and on the left hand, and by great force he unhorsed three knights.

And then the knights of the Table Round withdrew themselves, after they had gotten their horses as well as they might.

"Ah, mercy Jesu!" said Sir Gawaine, "What knight is yonder, that doth such marvelous deeds in that field?"

"I know what he is," said the king, "but at this time I will not name him."

"Sir," said Sir Gawaine, "I would say it were Sir Launcelot by his riding and his buffets that I see him deal. But yet it seems it should not be he, for he beareth that red sleeve upon his helmet; for I never knew him to bear token of a lady at any joust."

"Let him be," said King Arthur, "for he will be known before he departs."

Then the party that was against King Arthur was well comforted, and they that had been so sorely forced back now held themselves together. Then nine knights of Sir Launcelot's kin thrust in mightily, for they were all noble knights and thought to rebuke Sir Launcelot, for they knew him not.

And so they came hurling together and smote down many knights of North Wales and Northumberland. And when Sir Launcelot saw them fare so, he got a great spear in his hand; and three knights of his kin encountered with him at once, Sir Bors, Sir Ector, and Sir Lionel. And they three smote him at once with their spears, and with force they smote Sir Launcelot's horse to the earth. And by misfortune Sir Bors smote Sir Launcelot through the shield into his side, and the spear broke and the head was left in his side.

When Sir Lavayne saw his master lie on the ground he ran to the King of Scots and smote him to the earth and brought his horse to Sir Launcelot and

made him to mount upon that horse. And Sir Launcelot felt himself so sorely hurt that he thought he would have his death. Yet he hurled into the thickest press of them all, and did there the most marvelous deeds of arms that ever man saw. And though he might have slain many knights of his kin, when he saw their faces his heart would not let him, and so he left them there.

And then the king blew retreat, and the prize was given to the knight with the white shield that bore the red sleeve. Then came the King of North Wales and the King of Northumberland and the King with the Hundred Knights and said unto Sir Launcelot,

"Fair knight, God bless you, for much have ye done for us this day. And therefore we pray that ye will come with us and receive the honor and the prize as ye have worshipfully deserved."

"Fair lords," said Sir Launcelot, "if I have deserved thanks, I have richly bought it, for I am never likely to escape with my life. Therefore I pray that ye will let me depart, for I am sorely hurt."

And therewithal he groaned piteously and rode away till he came to the edge of a woods. And when he was sure he might not be seen, then he said with a high voice and a great groan,

"Ah, gentle knight, Sir Lavayne! Help me draw this spear out of my side, for it sticketh me so sore that it nearly slayeth me."

"Ay, my lord," said Sir Lavayne, "I would gladly do what might please you, but I fear that if I pull it out ye shall be in peril of death."

"I charge you," said Sir Launcelot, "as ye love me, draw it out!"

And therewithal they descended from their horses, and forthwith Sir Lavayne drew the spear out of Sir Launcelot's side, and Sir Launcelot gave a great shriek and a grisly groan, and the blood burst out, almost a pint at once. And at the last he sank down and swooned, deadly and pale.

And when Sir Launcelot opened his eyes, then Sir Lavayne put him upon his horse, and then they rode till they came to a hermitage where was a hermit that was once a noble knight of the fellowship of King Arthur. And his name was Sir Baudwin of Britain. And when Sir Lavayne saw him he begged him for God's sake to help.

"What knight is he?" said the hermit. "Is he of the house of King Arthur or not?"

"I know not," said Sir Lavayne. "But I know I saw him this day do marvelous deeds of arms."

But the hermit beheld Sir Launcelot better, and saw by a wound on his cheek that he was Sir Launcelot.

"Alas," said the hermit, "my own lord! Surely I ought to know you, for ye are the most noble knight of the world. For well I know you for Sir Launcelot."

And so the hermit bore him into the hermitage and unarmed him and laid him in a bed. And then he staunched his blood and made him to drink good wine, so that he was well restored.

So when, after the tournament, the kings of both parties were together and the great feast was being held, King Arthur asked where was that knight that bore the red sleeve.

"Bring him before me, that he may have the prize, as it is right."

Then spoke the King with the Hundred Knights and said,

"We suppose that knight is so wounded that he is never likely to see you or any of us. And that is the greatest pity that ever we knew."

"Alas," said the king, "this is the worst tidings that came to me these seven years! For I would not, for all the lands I own, learn that that noble knight were slain."

"By my head," said Sir Gawaine, "if he may be found, I shall find him, for I am sure he is not far from this country."

Right so Sir Gawaine took a squire with him and rode all about the country, and by the way he happened to lodge at Astolat with Sir Barnard, where Sir Launcelot had lodged. And as he was in his chamber, Sir Barnard and his daughter Elaine came in to him to ask him who did best at the tournament of Winchester.

"So God me help," said Sir Gawaine, "there were two knights that bore two white shields, but one of them bore a red sleeve upon his head, and certainly he was the best knight that ever I saw. For I dare say that one knight with the red sleeve smote down forty knights of the Round Table, and his fellow did right well and worshipfully."

"Now blessed be God," said the Fair Maid of Astolat, "for he is the man in the world that I first loved, and truly he shall be the last that ever I shall love."

"Now, fair maiden," said Sir Gawaine, "is that good knight your love?"

"Certainly, sir," she said.

"Then know ye his name?" said Sir Gawaine.

"Nay, truly, sir," said the damsel, "I know neither his name nor from whence he came, but I promise I love him."

"How had ye knowledge of him first?" said Sir Gawaine.

Then she told him all, how her father entrusted him her brother to do him service, and how her father lent him her brother Sir Tirry's shield.

"And here with me he left his own shield," she said.

"For what cause did he so?" said Sir Gawaine.

"His shield was full well known among many noble knights," said the damsel.

"Ah, fair damsel," said Sir Gawaine, "will it please you to let me have a sight of that shield?"

So the shield was sent for, and when Sir Gawaine beheld it he knew at once that it was Sir Launcelot's shield.

"Ah, Jesu mercy!" said Sir Gawaine, "now is my heart more heavier than ever it was before. Fair damsel, ye love the most honorable knight of the world and the man of most worship. And truly, I have known that noble knight these four-and-twenty years, and never did I nor any other knight see him bear a token of any lady at a tournament. And therefore, fair maiden, ye are much beholden to him to give him thanks. But I fear that ye shall nevermore see him in this world."

"Alas," said she, "how may this be? Is he slain?"

"I say not so," said Sir Gawaine, "but he is grievously wounded. And know ye now that he is the noble knight Sir Launcelot, for by this shield I know him."

"Alas!" said the Fair Maid of Astolat. "And what was his hurt?"

"Truly," said Sir Gawaine, "the man in the world that loved him best hurt him. And I dare say that if that knight knew he had hurt Sir Launcelot, it would be the greatest sorrow that ever came to his heart."

"Now, fair father," then said Elaine, "I require that you give me leave to ride and seek him, or else I shall go out of my mind. For I shall never stop till I find him and my brother Sir Lavayne."

"Do as you like," said her father, "for I sorely regret the hurt of that noble knight."

Right so the maid departed, making great sorrow. Then on the morn Sir Gawaine came to King Arthur and told him how he had found Sir Launcelot's shield in the keeping of the Fair Maid of Astolat.

"All that," said King Arthur, "I knew before, and for that cause I would not let you have ado at the great joust; for I saw him when he came unto his lodgings, late at night, at Astolat. But I have great marvel, that ever he would bear any token of a damsel, for ere now I never knew him to do so."

"By my head," said Sir Gawaine, "the Fair Maid of Astolat loveth him marvelously well. What it meaneth, I cannot say. She is ridden to seek him."

So the king and all came to London, and there Gawaine openly disclosed to all the court that it was Sir Launcelot that jousted best. And when Sir Bors heard that, he was a heavy man. But when the queen heard that it was Sir Launcelot that bore the red sleeve of the Fair Maid of Astolat, she was nearly out of her mind with rage. And she sent for Sir Bors de Ganys in all haste. And when Sir Bors was come before the queen she said,

"Ah, Sir Bors! Have ye not heard say how falsely Sir Launcelot hath betrayed me?"

"Alas, madam," said Sir Bors, "I fear he hath betrayed himself and us all."

"No matter," said the queen, "if he be destroyed. For he is a false traitor knight."

"Madam," said Sir Bors, "I pray you say so no more, for I may not hear such language of him."

"Why so, Sir Bors?" said she. "Should I not call him traitor when he bore the red sleeve upon his head at Winchester at the great joust?"

"Madam," said Sir Bors, "the bearing of that sleeve grieveth me. But I dare say he bore it only so that none of his kin should know him."

"Fie on him!" said the queen. "And yet, for all his pride and boasting, ye proved yourself there a better man than he."

"Nay, madam, say ye nevermore so. For he beat me and my fellows, and might have slain us, if he had wished."

"Fie on him!" said the queen. "I heard Sir Gawaine say before my lord Arthur that it is marvelous to tell of the great love that is between the Fair Maid of Astolat and him."

"Madam," said Sir Bors, "I may not stop Sir Gawaine from saying what he likes. But as for my lord Sir Launcelot, I dare say that he loveth all ladies the same. And therefore, madam, ye may say what ye will; but I will hasten to seek him and find him wheresoever he may be, and may God send me good tidings of him!"

And so we leave them there, and speak of Sir Launcelot, that lay in great danger. And as this Fair Maid Elaine came to Winchester she sought there all about, and by chance Sir Lavayne, her brother, had ridden forth that day, and at once as this maiden Elaine saw him, she cried aloud to him; and when he heard her he came to her. And then she asked her brother,

"How doth my lord, Sir Launcelot?"

"Who told you, sister, that my lord's name was Sir Launcelot?"

Then she told him how Sir Gawaine had known him by his shield. So Sir Lavayne brought her to Sir Launcelot, and when she saw him lie so sick and pale in his bed, she shrieked and said,

"My lord, Sir Launcelot! Alas, why lie ye in this plight?"

And then she swooned. And when she came to herself, Sir Launcelot said,

"Fair maiden, why fare ye thus? For ye put me at more pain. But if ye be come to comfort me, ye be right welcome. And of this little hurt that I have, I shall hastily be healed, by the grace of God. But I marvel who told you my name."

And so this maiden told him all.

"Alas!" said Sir Launcelot, "I regret that my name is known."

And he reflected in his mind that Sir Gawaine would tell Queen Guenever how he bore the red sleeve and for whom, and he knew well that that would cause great anger.

But this maiden Elaine never went from Sir Launcelot, but watched him day and night, that there was never a woman did kindlier for any man. Then Sir Launcelot prayed Sir Lavayne to keep watch in Winchester for Sir Bors if he came there, and told him by what token he should know him: by a wound in his forehead.

"For I am sure," said Sir Launcelot, "that Sir Bors will seek me, for he is the same good knight that hurt me."

And when Sir Bors came to Winchester, Sir Lavayne laid watch for him, and at once brought him to the hermitage. And when Sir Bors saw Sir Launcelot lie in his bed, dead pale and discolored, for kindness and pity he could not speak, but wept tenderly a great while. But when he might speak, he said thus:

"Ah, my lord, Sir Launcelot, God bless you and send you a hasty recovery! I fear that God is greatly displeased with me, that He would allow me to have such a shame as to hurt you. Alas, that ever such a miserable knight as I should have the power to hurt the most noble knight of the world! I shamefully set upon you and overcharged you, and yet when ye might have slain me, ye saved me. Wherefore, my lord, Sir Launcelot, I ask you mercy!'

"Fair cousin," said Sir Launcelot, "ye be right welcome. But know that ye say things that please me not. For with pride I would have overcome you all. And for my pride I was near slain, and that was mine own fault. For there is an old saying, 'there is hard battle where kin and friends do battle against each other.' Therefore, fair cousin, let us leave this matter."

Then Sir Bors leaned upon his bedside and told Sir Launcelot how the queen was greatly wroth with him.

"I am right sorry," said Sir Launcelot, "but I deserved no wrath, for all that I did was because I would not be known."

"Sir, right so I excused you," said Sir Bors, "but all was in vain. But, sir, is this she, that is so busy about you, that men call the Fair Maid of Astolat?"

"It is she," said Sir Launcelot. "By no means can I put her from me."

"Why should ye put her from you?" said Sir Bors. "For she is a passing fair damsel. Would God, fair cousin, that ye could love her; but as to that, I may not advise you. But I see by her diligence about you that she loveth you entirely."

"That grieveth me," said Sir Launcelot.

"Well," said Sir Bors, "she is not the first that hath lost her pain upon you."

And so they talked of many more things. And within three or four days Sir Launcelot grew strong and active. Then Sir Bors told Sir Launcelot how there was to be a great tournament between King Arthur and the King of North Wales, that should be upon All Saints' Day at Winchester.

"Is that truth?" said Sir Launcelot. "Then shall ye abide with me still a little while until I be well, for I feel myself reasonably big and strong."

"Blessed be God!" said Sir Bors.

Then were they there together nearly a month, and ever this maiden Elaine did her best for Sir Launcelot both night and day; wherefore Sir Bors was greatly pleased with her.

So upon a day, by the assent of Sir Lavayne, Sir Bors, and Sir Launcelot, they made the hermit and fair Elaine to seek in the woods for herbs. And so in the meanwhile Sir Launcelot made Sir Lavayne to arm him, that he might try himself on horseback, to know whether he might wield his armor and his spear, despite his wound, or not.

And so when Sir Launcelot was upon his horse, he bade Sir Lavayne give him the great spear. And then the horse, which was lusty and strong, because he had not been ridden for a month, leaped mightily when he felt the spurs, and Sir Launcelot, that was the noblest horseman in the world, strained him mightily and firmly. But he strained himself so severely, with so great force, that the bottom of his wound burst both within and without, and therewithal the blood came out so fiercely that he might not sit upon his horse. And then Sir Launcelot cried,

"Ah, Sir Bors and Sir Lavayne, help! For I am come unto mine end!"

And therewith he fell down to the earth like a dead corpse. And then Sir Bors and Sir Lavayne came unto him with great sorrow-making. And so by chance this maiden Elaine heard their mourning; and she came, and when she found Sir Launcelot she cried and wept as if she had been mad. And she kissed him and did what she might to awake him, and then she rebuked her brother and Sir Bors, and called them false traitors, and said,

"Why would ye take him out of his bed? If he die, I will charge you with his death!"

And so with that came the hermit, Sir Baudwin of Britain, and when he found Sir Launcelot in that plight he was passing wroth, but he said only,

"Let us take him in."

And they bore Sir Launcelot into the hermitage and unarmed him and laid him in his bed; and evermore his wound bled violently, but he stirred not a limb. Then the knight-hermit put a thing in his nose and a little water in his mouth, and then Sir Launcelot waked from his swoon. And then the hermit staunched his bleeding, and when Sir Launcelot might speak, he asked why he put his life so in danger.

"Sir," said Sir Launcelot, "because I thought I had been strong enough. Sir Bors told me there should be at All Saints' Day a great tournament between King Arthur and the King of North Wales. And therefore I thought to try myself, to know whether I might be there or not."

"Ah, Sir Launcelot," said the hermit, "your heart and your courage will never be done until your last day! But now do by my advice: let Sir Bors depart and do at that tournament what he may; and, by the grace of God, when that tournament be done and he come hither again, sir, ye shall be healed."

Then Sir Bors made him ready and departed and came to the court of King Arthur and told them in what place he had left Sir Launcelot.

"I am sorry for that," said the king. "But since he has his life, we may all thank God."

"Fie on him!" said the queen. "I am right sorry if he shall have his life."

"Madam, he shall have his life," said Sir Bors, "and whoever wishes otherwise, except you, madam, we of his kin would help to shorten their lives! But, madam, ye have often been displeased with my lord Sir Launcelot, but at all times in the end ye found him a true knight."

And so he departed. And then every knight of the Round Table that was at that time present made them ready for that tournament at All Saints' Day. And as the day drew near, thither came the King of North Wales and the King with the Hundred Knights, and many knights of diverse countries.

And on that day, Sir Gawaine did great deeds of arms, and began first; and the heralds numbered that he smote down twenty knights. And Sir Bors de Ganys came in at the same time as Sir Gawaine, and it was numbered that he smote down twenty knights; and therefore the prize was given between them both, for they began first and endured longest. Also Sir Gareth did that day great deeds of arms, for he smote down and pulled down thirty knights; but when he had done these deeds he departed suddenly, and therefore he lost his prize.

So when this tournament was done Sir Bors departed, and rode till he came to Sir Launcelot, his cousin. And he found him walking on his feet, and each made great joy of the other. So then they made them ready to depart from the hermitage. And so upon a morn they took their horses, and Elaine went with them. And when they came to Astolat, there were they well lodged. But upon the morn, when Sir Launcelot should depart, fair Elaine brought her father with her, and Sir Lavayne, and Sir Tirry, and then she said thus:

"My lord, Sir Launcelot, now I see ye will depart from me. Now, fair and courteous knight, have mercy upon me and let me not die for your love."

"What would ye that I did?" said Sir Launcelot.

"Sir, I would have you for my husband," said Elaine.

"Fair damsel, I thank you heartily," said Sir Launcelot, "but I am resolved never to be a wedded man."

"Then, fair knight," said she, "will ye be my lover?"

"Jesu defend me!" said Sir Launcelot. "If I did that, I should ill reward your father and your brother for their great goodness."

"Alas!" said she, "then I must die for your love."

"Ye shall not do so," said Sir Launcelot. "Fair damsel, I shall never marry. But because ye love me as ye say ye do, I will, for your goodwill and kindness, show you some goodness. That is this, that whenever ye shall set your heart upon some good knight that will wed you, I shall give you together a thousand pounds yearly. And always, while I live, will I be your own knight."

"Sir, of all this," said the maiden, "I want none. For unless ye will wed me, or be my lover, at the least, know, Sir Launcelot, that my days are done."

"Fair damsel," said Sir Launcelot, "from these two things ye must excuse me."

Then she shrieked shrilly and fell down in a swoon, and women bore her to her chamber, and there she made overmuch sorrow. And then Sir Launcelot would depart, and he asked Sir Lavayne what he would do.

"Sir," said Sir Lavayne, I will follow you, unless ye drive me from you or command me to go from you."

Then came Sir Barnard to Sir Launcelot and said to him,

"I cannot see but that my daughter will die for your sake."

"Sir, I am sorry," said Sir Launcelot, "that she loveth me as she doth, for I was never the causer of it. And yet I am right sorrowful of her distress! For she is a full fair maiden, good and gentle and well taught."

Then Sir Launcelot took his leave, and so they departed and came to Winchester. And when King Arthur knew that Sir Launcelot was come whole and sound, the king made great joy of him; and so did Sir Gawaine and all the knights of the Round Table. But Queen Guenever was greatly wroth with Sir Launcelot, and would by no means speak with him.

And all the while the Fair Maid of Astolat made such sorrow day and night that she never slept, nor ate, nor drank. So when she had thus endured ten days, and was so feeble that she must needs pass out of this world, then she confessed herself and received the last rites.

And then she called her father, Sir Barnard, and her brother, Sir Tirry, and heartily she prayed that they might write a letter for her. And when the letter was written, then she prayed that she might be watched until she were dead.

"And then," said she, "let this letter be put in my right hand. And let me be put in a fair bed, with all the richest clothes that I have, and so let my bed be drawn in a chariot to the River Thames; and there let me be put within a little barge, and but one man with me, such as ye trust, to row me thither; and let my barge be covered with black samite over and over. And thus, father, I beg you, let it be done."

So her father granted her faithfully that all things should be done as she had said. Then her father and her brother made great sorrow for her. And when this was done, straightway she died.

And when she was dead, the corpse and the bed were taken into the Thames, and there a man and the corpse and all the things she had mentioned were put in the Thames. And so the man rowed the barge unto Westminster, and there it rubbed and rolled to and fro a great while before any man espied it.

So by chance King Arthur and Queen Guenever were talking together at a window, and so as they looked on the Thames they espied that black barge, and marveled what it meant. Then the king called Sir Kay and showed it to him, and said,

"Now go ye thither, and take with you Sir Brandiles and Sir Agravaine, and bring me word what is there."

Then these three knights departed and came to the barge and went in. And there they found the fairest corpse lying in a rich bed that ever eye saw, and a poor man sitting in the barge's end, and no word would he speak. So these three knights returned unto the king again and told him what they found.

"That fair corpse will I see," said the king.

And so the king took the queen by the hand and went thither. Then the king ordered the barge to be made fast, and then the king and the queen went in with certain knights, and there he saw the fairest woman lie in a rich bed, covered with many rich clothes, and all was of cloth of gold. And she lay as if she smiled. Then the queen espied the letter in her right hand and told the king, and the king took it and said,

"Now I am sure this letter will tell us what she was, and why she is come hither."

So then the king and the queen went out of the barge, and when the king was come to his chamber he called many knights about him, and said that he would openly learn what was written within that letter. Then the king opened it, and made a clerk to read it, and this was the meaning of the letter:

"Most noble knight, my lord Sir Launcelot, now hath death divided us two. I was your lover, that men called the Fair Maid of Astolat. Therefore unto all ladies I lament; yet pray ye for my soul and bury me, at the least, and offer ye my mass-penny. This is my last request. I died a pure maiden, I take God to witness. And pray for my soul, Sir Launcelot."

This was all that was in the letter. And when it was read, the king, the queen, and all the knights wept for pity. Then was Sir Launcelot sent for, and King Arthur made the letter to be read to him. And when Sir Launcelot heard it, word by word, he said,

"My lord Arthur, understand that I am right sorrowful for the death of this lady. God knoweth I was never causer of her death, and that I will assert before her own brother that is here, Sir Lavayne. I will not deny that she was both fair and good, and much was I beholden unto her; but she loved me beyond measure."

"Sir," said the queen, "ye might have shown her some kindness and gentleness which might have saved her life."

"Madam," said Sir Launcelot, "she would be satisfied in no other way except that she be my wife, or else my lover, and these two things I would not grant her. But I offered her, for the good love that she showed me, a thousand pounds yearly when she should marry. For, madam, I love not to be forced to love, for love must only arise from the heart, and not by force."

Then after a time the queen sent for Sir Launcelot and begged pardon, because she had been wroth with him without cause.

"This is not the first time," said Sir Launcelot, "that ye have been displeased with me without cause. But, madam, ever must I tolerate you, though ye care not what sorrow I endure."

Then said the king unto Sir Launcelot,

"Sir, it is for you to oversee that she be honorably buried."

"Sir," said Sir Launcelot, "that shall be done as I can best devise."

And many knights went thither to behold that fair dead maiden; and upon the morn she was richly laid to rest. And then the poor man went again with the barge.